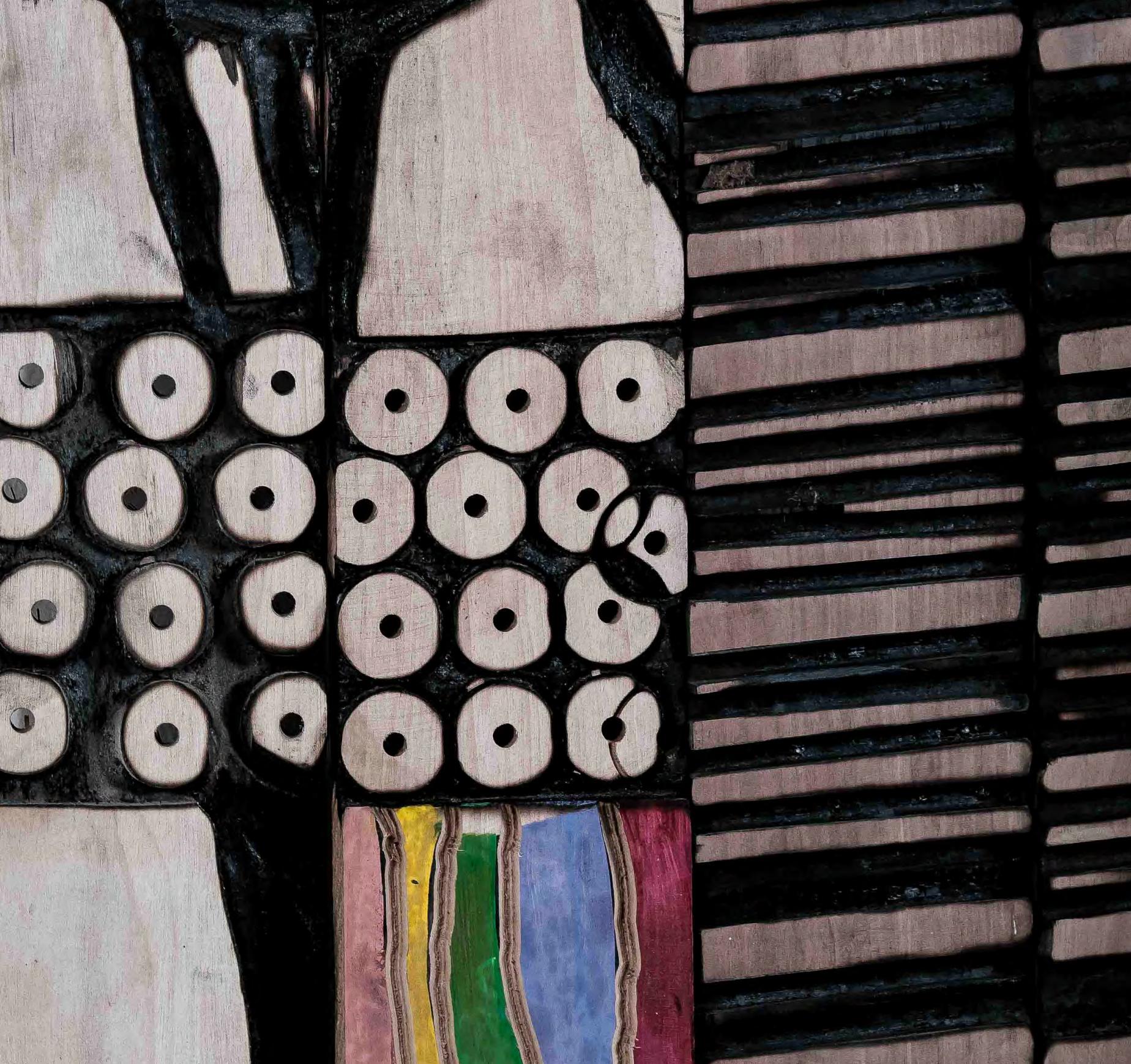




EL ANATSUI

SHARD SONG





FOUNDERS' INTRODUCTION EFIE GALLERY

To commence the opening of Efie Gallery's first permanent address, the gallery is proud to host El Anatsui's first solo exhibition in Dubai, *Shard Song*. This exhibition, with Mae-Ling Lokko as the curator and Aida Muluneh as the creative director, will present a series of new wooden sculptures that recall Anatsui's earlier practice in this medium and its continued evolution, complimented by a range of signature bottle cap works.

The selection of Dubai for the first location of Efie Gallery and the respective decision to open this address with the work of El Anatsui, is in seeking to add to the cross-cultural exchange between the Middle East and Africa.

"Art grows out of each particular situation, and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up." – El Anatsui

The nascence of the contemporary art scene in Dubai offers the perfect terrain for expansion and innovation. Whereas in the West where there has been the need and desire to deconstruct previous narratives surrounding African artists and art from Africa, here in the East we are presented with a unique opportunity to rather focus on the construction of a narrative and the shaping of a new environment in regard to art from the continent.

Dubai presents an optimal site for said cross-cultural exchange and it was imperative to open our permanent address with the highly-esteemed El Anatsui to ensure that the environment for art from Africa within this region is presented with a solid foundation for further growth to be harvested upon.

Valentina Mintah, Kobi Mintah and Kwame Mintah
Founders
March 2022

ABOUT EFIE GALLERY

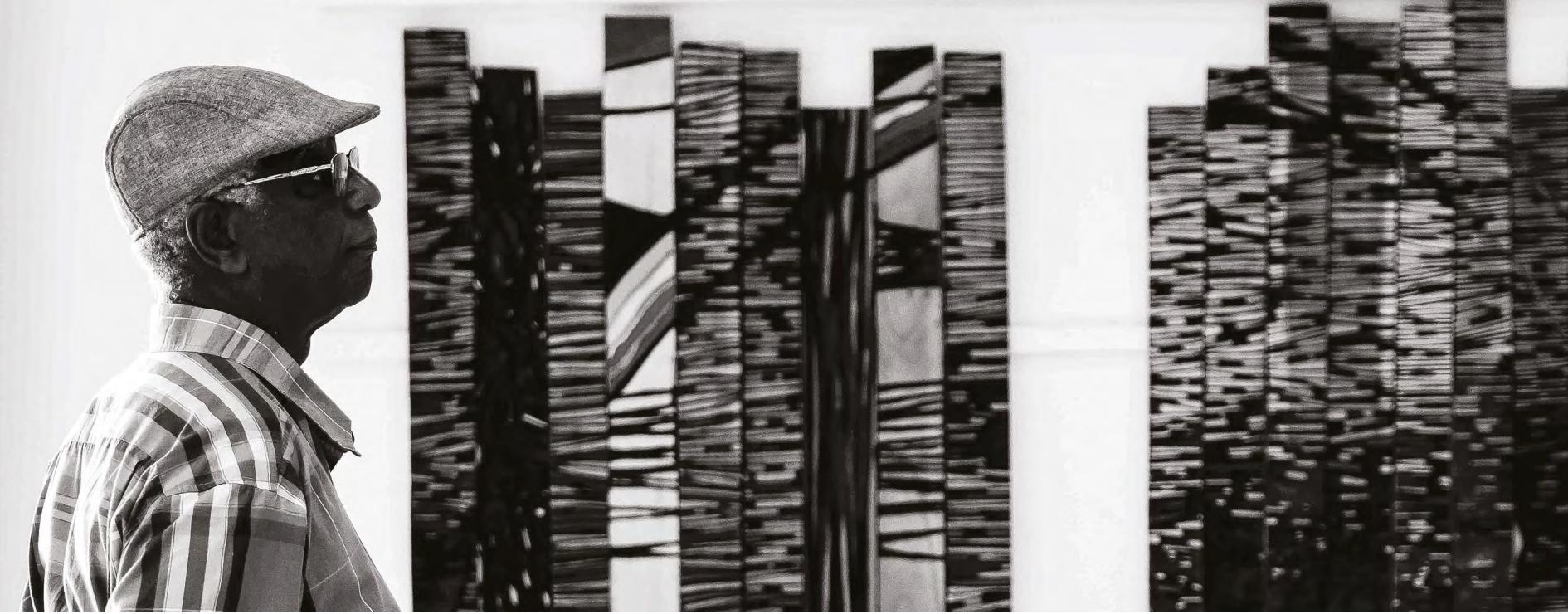
Efie Gallery is a contemporary art gallery located in Dubai specialised in the promotion of artists from Africa, both within the continent and the diaspora, with a particular focus on artists ranging from West Africa. The gallery represents both mid-career and established artists and supports the sharing of their works in the Middle East, creating a unique platform for collaboration and exchange between the two regions. This platform for collaboration goes beyond the mere exhibition of artists from Africa, rather an artist studio for residency programmes caters for both the gallery's artists and local artists, presenting itself as the active site for said collaboration.

Efie Gallery's mission is threefold, embedded in the notions of artist promotion, protection and preservation. In its approach, the gallery is focused on building strong relationships with artists to appropriately represent and shape a narrative bound to their artwork and the vision they have for this artwork.

The mezzanine hosts a record gallery which exhibits rare and important vinyl records from around the world. Through the exhibition of records, the gallery seeks to highlight the intersection of art and music, ultimately allowing for a holistic celebration of the Arts. The record gallery also offers an intimate space where visitors can enjoy a relaxed environment, serving an assortment of speciality bites and beverages.

Efie Gallery was founded by *Valentina Mintah, Kobi Mintah and Kwame Mintah*





EL ANATSUI ARTIST

El Anatsui was born in Ghana in 1944. He lives and works between his two studios in Tema, Ghana and Nsukka, Nigeria.

His practice for many years has straddled concerns around the heritage and customs of his countries of birth, residence and career – including inspiration from his interactions with the world at large, over time.

Although he is globally famous for his metal artworks made out of used bottle caps and copper wire, Anatsui is the consummate artist who has consistently transformed mediums such as paper, wood and other kinds of metal into various expressions of art. Whereas his metal sculptures challenge the traditional views of sculpture - rigid and insistent, his woodworks test the other opinion that mediums such as wood being rigid, is restrictive and therefore shaped to activate poetics with ease or to take on fluidity and flexibility in the hands of sculptors. El Anatsui is noted for this position - the Fluid and Ever-Changing Form.

Currently the most visible artist to have emerged from the 1970s art movement - Nsukka Group, and a trail-blazing contemporary artist of his time, his ethos evolved over time, deriving from his use of materials sourced locally in his environment and from speaking to his heritage as an African rather than working with foreign materials. His iconic medium, the aluminium bottle caps (discovered during a walk) and which flexibility sparked his imagination even though it was not at all original to his environment as was his previous canvas of wood. This unassuming object that continues to deeply affect his environment would on the one hand, make a profound impact on the world having been transformed into stunning works of art through the artist's imagination, whilst diminishing on the other hand, the preponderant negative environmental impact. Julian Lucas writing for the New Yorker in 2021 aptly described this process as the 'Trash to Treasure novelty'.

Anatsui generously offers creative freedom as regards the installation of his metal and wood artworks. He encourages the re-arrangement of the panels as directed by any incumbent custodian. This is a nod to his words captured during an interview with Art Basel, in 2019 "The golden rule is there are no rules.... As an artist, your worth is determined by how you can operate without rules". In so doing, he subtly confers the title of 'artist' to art handlers, collectors, curators, and to his audience.

His recent accolades include the Praemium Imperiale Award (2017) by the Japan Art Association, and the 56th Venice Biennale Golden Lion award for Lifetime Achievement (2015). He is a Fellow of the Pan African Survey of Artists, a member of the Forum for African Artists and an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

El Anatsui has held over 80 solo exhibitions worldwide. His works were shown in the main exhibitions of the Venice Biennale (1990 and 2007). He was exhibited in the landmark inaugural Ghana pavilion in 2019. His artworks are prominently sought after in the primary and secondary art markets, and they already belong in notable corporate and individual art collections such as the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian), in Washington, D.C.-USA; the Museum of Modern Art, NY-USA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY-USA; the Vatican Museums, the Vatican-Italy; the British Museum, London; the De Young Museum, CA-USA; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, to name a few.

A celebrated professor whose career in Sculpture spans up to 50 years, and an acclaimed alchemic practitioner in the art world, he continues to influence and inspire generations of artists across borders, one might dare to suggest that El Anatsui is a modern day quintessential polymath.



MÆ-LING LOKKO CURATOR

Mae-ling Lokko is a designer, an artist and educator from Ghana and the Philippines whose work integrates a broad range of technical, environmental and cultural criteria to meet generative justice goals. Lokko is a forthcoming Assistant Professor at Yale University in 2022 and is currently an Assistant Professor Adjunct at Cooper Union, New York. Lokko was the Director for the Building Sciences Program and Assistant Professor at Rensselaer's School of Architecture from 2018-2021. Lokko holds a Ph.D. and Masters of Science in Architectural Science from the Center of Architecture, Science and Ecology, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and B.A from Tufts University. She is also the founder of Willow Technologies, Ltd. based in Accra, Ghana focused on the development of integrated material life cycles within the food, agriculture and building sector. Lokko's recent projects have been exhibited globally at Z33 House for Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture, Hasselt (2022), Sonsbeek 20-24 Biennial, Netherlands (2021), Angewandte Innovation Lab (2021), Triennale Milano (2020), Somerset House (2020), Luma Foundation, Arles (2019), 4th Istanbul Design Biennial (2018) and at the Royal Institute of British Architects-North as part of the Liverpool Biennial.

"The rhythm of time and history" by Mae-Ling Lokko

Like an object moving through a viscous fluid, the spirit of the 'shard' has been reincarnated time and time again in El Anatsui's work. The term 'shard' goes back to the fundamental unit – a broken fragment, a lost bit, or severed piece –that has been generated from a process of rupture or division. Yet the dormant life force and potential for reconnection is embodied within the very notion of the shard. This begins with the idea that the true identity of anything is rendered visible in the way it either breaks or holds strong along the patterns of its structure and strength of its bonds. But more fervently, Anatsui's explorations in *Shard Song* offer a deeper meaning of reconnection in the aftermath of trauma –that kinship is born in shared wounds.

At the turn of every material exploration in Anatsui's journey as an artist—from clay, wood, textile, glass, metal— it is this material metamorphosis of the shard and its relationship to Anatsuian sculpture that continues to offer the world yet another angle or quality unexplored in the universal, complex narrative of fragmentation and kinship. To many, turning the spotlight in *Shard Song* onto Anatsui's woodworks after twenty-four years of global reverence for his metallic hanging sculptures may appear like a 'reunion' with an old friend. Yet El's relationship with wood has never wavered, persistently deepening since the late 1960s, cumulatively absorbing and translating lessons from other media to evolve the conceptual freedom that emerges in his new wooden sculptures.

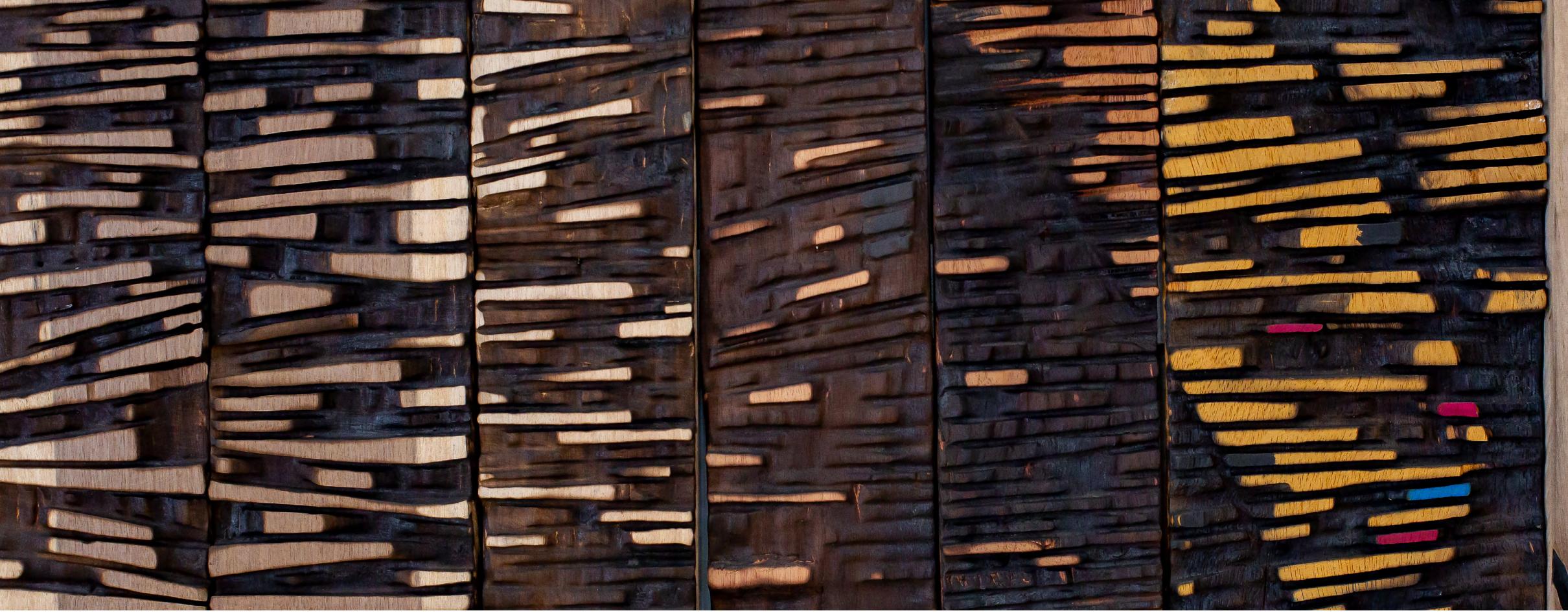
Sixty years on from his initial explorations with clay, Anatsui has begun to capture the transient, dynamic quality and malleability that he developed in the three-dimensional *Broken Pots* sculpture series with earthen media. As a two-dimensional wall sculpture, the challenge



of malleability is accomplished in a wide range of rich, micro-scale topographical variations on the surface of half-inch thick wooden panels. Ranging from well-defined, triangulated-patterns as seen in DNA to the fluid-like shards dissipating into space in Rainbow Hues, the surface of tropical Ghanaian hardwood panels are rendered pliable and receptive to the nuances of human hand.

The slow, iterative nature of the sculptural process is revealed in the close relationship of wood with hand. Unlike the larger vertical panels huddled shoulder to shoulder, that have been cut with a mechanical saw and whose wounded boundaries are hidden from view, it is the hand that processes the violence that begins on the panel edge, to the materials interior and finally to the surface. Carved, burnt, sanded, and brushed iteratively by the human hand, the hardwood medium is patiently shaped. Over a ten-month period, Anatsui wields again and again, the power of time, rest, and renewed vision, to capture the minute agency and response of material to force. What begins as varied widths of vertical wooden panels arranged on the floor, is transformed through a rhythmic arrangement on the studio's wall. Calibrated shifts in the vertical height of the panels assembled together, communicate a sense of their vulnerability to force at this scale. As if the inhalation of clean, smooth cuts made by the mechanical saw along their long edges, have eventually exhaled a quivering quality of their own when placed next to each other. Perhaps this is unique to the wood panel when reduced to a flat, long rectangular module, that the initial effect of an act of violence become so clearly expressed in the collective assembly.

At this scale, one experiences a distinct manifestation of shard that contrasts with the more obvious smaller-scale shards generated on the sculpted surface that greets the viewer's eye. Here, the wound of each wooden panel's edge is powerfully controlled, with its entire length exposed and touching that of its neighbor. This absorption through touch and proximity continues to activate and inform how the wooden canvas is shaped and changed over time. Much like an ever-shifting puzzle, nothing is frozen in Anatsui's process, and no relationship between module is impossible until a clear bonding language emerges between them. If one seeks to explore the nuances in Anatsui's language of rupture, it is here that the



language of trauma not spoken, yet sedimented in the material body is masterfully induced. The magic in Anatsui's works rests in this multimodal, multiplanar experience –what appears to be mute from one vantage point, is simultaneously revealed as undergoing exponential possibilities in response to force.

Force is always rendered present and powerful in Anatsui's work—be it in the direct, blunt trauma of mechanical saw on wood or in the anticipated freedom of gravity acting on the hung sculpture. Over a six decade-long meditation on the language of causality, in Shard Song Anatsui opens the door to the expressive heterogeneity of force across three new wood sculptures. In the Keyboard of Life, the directionality of a singular convergent force moves horizontally across the entire sculpture.

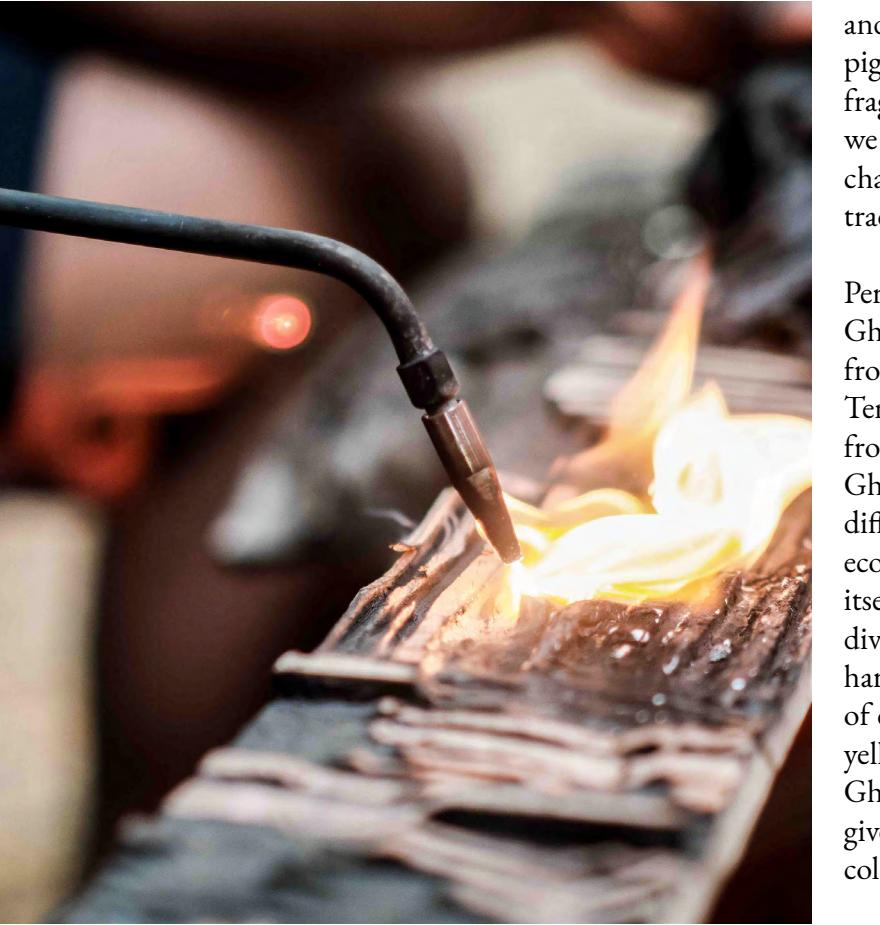
Pre-convergent forces are distinguished by regions of bare tropical wood culminating at a point, after which divergent forces are expressed

as deeper carved patterns and charred surfaces of topographical richness. In Ancient Text, this language of force is embodied as two powerful circular eddies carved into the surface of the hardwood. Typically caused in nature by the countermovement of fluids to the prevailing current, the intense transfer of energy from the eddy is distributed feverishly in the vertical and horizontal kinetic movement of shards, appearing as energetic collisions with each other. Conversely in Rainbow Hues, a gentle distribution of force emanates from a rainbow that arches across seventeen vertical wooden pieces. Closely packed shards slide and slip against each other, generating a fluidic absorption and transfer of force throughout its body.

Multiple planes of movement are simultaneously observed from the sculptures' front elevations, generating varying degrees of depth in these layered compositions. In Keyboard of Life, we observe the insertion of vertically patterned and bare panels into the dominant family of horizontally shards.

Yet these vertical elements do not appear to interrupt the vector of horizontal movement, in so much as they work to index time and speed of such forces. Regions of the undulating charred topography, carefully carved into thin horizontal slivers evoke the qualitative experience of force – of its changing pressures, of light and dark, of density and emptiness. Tonal arrays of yellow, green, purple, and pink illuminate a vector of shards at the top of the sculpture almost illuminating as a beam of sunlight would, the presence of particles within seemingly invisible force. The complexity of this multiplanar approach emerges in Ancient Text, in viewing the circular spiral of the eddy and the haphazard grid of horizontal and vertical shard-like carvings.

Here it is almost as if a region of space above or in front of the eddy has been cut away from to reveal a different language of dimensional movement in relation to the eddy. It is at the threshold of the two—from circular to orthogonal movement—that a careful, complex translation of forces occur. Neither escape from this threshold the same.



and the charred black, Anatsui's steady exploration in the use of pigment continues to evolve. Infused into the language and form of fragments, fragmenting forces, and their surrounding environment, we witness a shift in Anatsui's control of color away from the characteristically bright and bold colors inspired by kente textile traditions to the now more tonal adjustments of color.

Perhaps this experimentation tone is in response to color in the Ghanaian tropical hardwood itself. Anatsui's return home to Ghana from Nsukka, and his activation of a new production studio in Tema, Ghana has also ushered in a renewed exploration of materials from the Ghanaian ecology. While there are many parallels in the Ghanaian and Nigerian domestic and industrial material inventory, differences in the types of hardwood available from these respective ecologies provoke Anatsui's exploration in color. Although Nsukka itself experiences a tropical savannah climate, and therefore reduced diversity in tree populations, Anatsui's access to a rich, variety of hardwoods from the surrounding forest region offered a wide range of colors intrinsic to the wood itself—from the reds of camwood to yellows, and even to pure white. The much-reduced color range of Ghanaian hardwoods, constrained to the middle region of yellows, gives rise to an opportunity to play with the tonal variation of colored pigments as another dimension for expression.

Within the circular rings, emerge patterns of deep wrinkles or cracks, and conversely, charred reliefs permeate and become part of the orthogonal patterned carvings. This contrast in pattern choices again endows us with an appreciation of time—of wrinkling as an indicator of the ancient quality of such forces and the shorter, energetic orthogonal vibrational patterns as a reminder of the present. The bright splash of yellow and blue across two vertical panels jolt us into the present and balance our attention in relation to the depth of the charred spiral.

Across all four wooden sculptures, it is this unselfconscious experimentation with color tones that we observe the growing pulse of Anatsui's uncensored freedom. Relative to his woodworks in the 1990s, that relied on the rich natural hues of tropical hardwood

Hues, a spectrum of pattern fluency is generated. It is in service of this quiet mediation on four masterpieces of forces and their derivative 'shard songs' that the exhibition design offers strategic journey to the wooden sculpture.

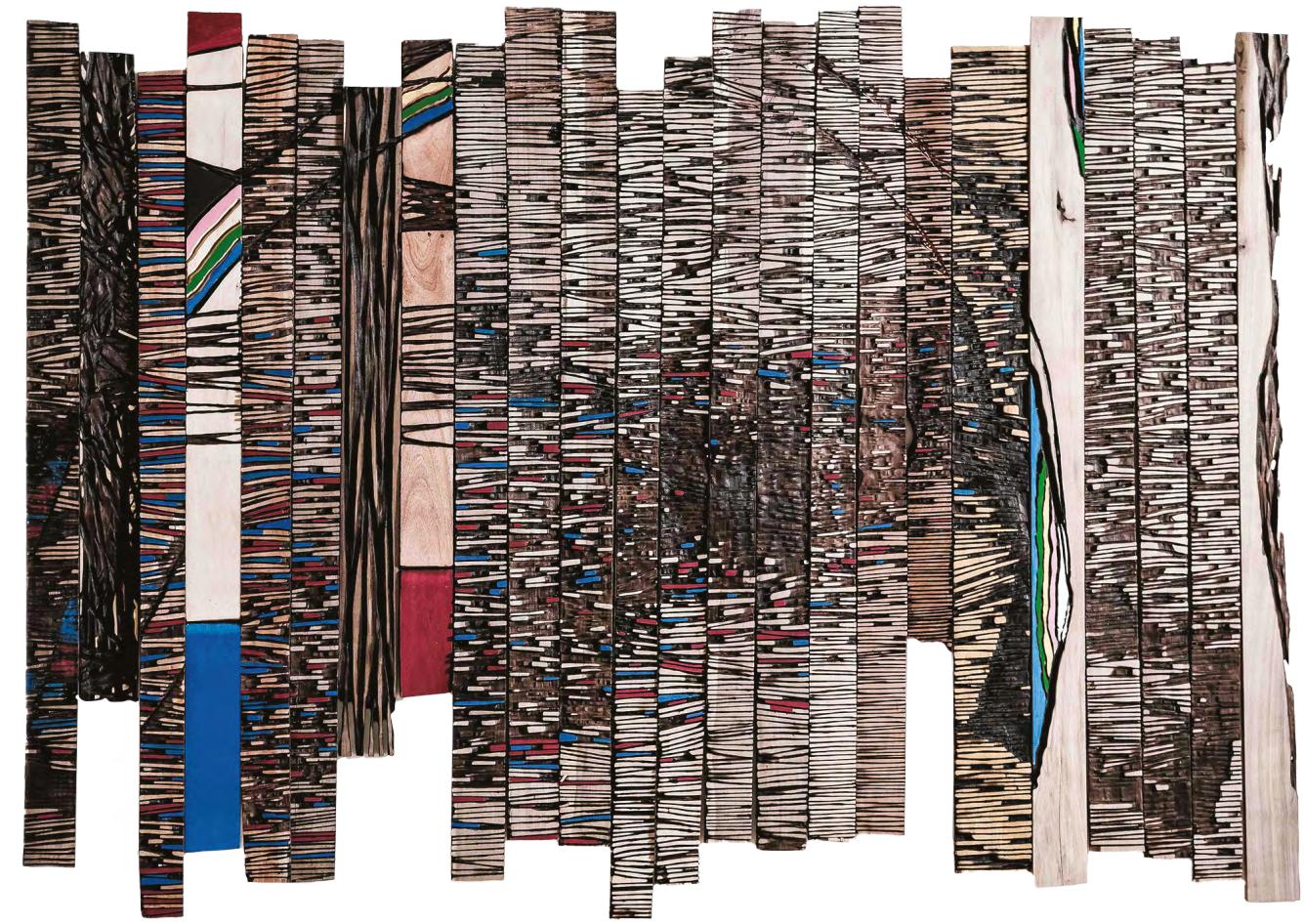
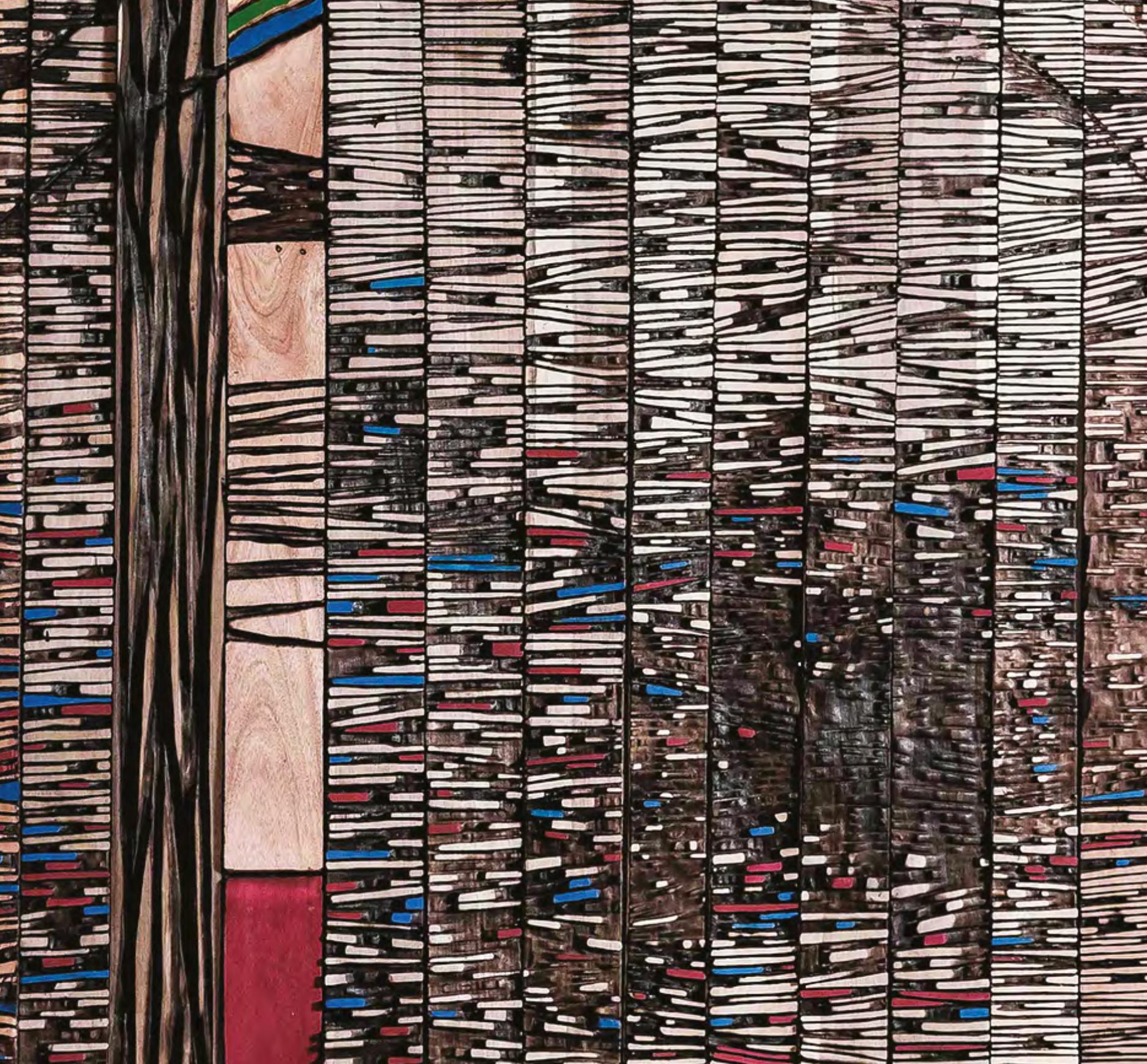
The exhibition is spatially organized into three zones that temper the visitors journey from a public, vibrant threshold towards a quiet, private interior refuge. Inspired by the social patterns of occupation in Ghanaian domestic courtyard spaces, which mediates one's arrival from hectic, public arena, circulation through the exhibition begins with two buffer zones in which Anatsui's metal sculptures are hung. These new and recent metal hanging sculptures offer an important relationship between the evolution of Anatsui's sculpture to wall and a persistent approach to detail at a small-scale infused his wood sculptures. Within these outer zones, the experience of bright light reflecting off the vibrant colors of the metal sculptures contrast dramatically with the solemn, dark interior zone where the wood sculptures are displayed. It is here in the embryonic core of the exhibition, that a meditation of four wood sculptures in conversation with each other is activated.

Although El Anatsui's return to his birth home and expansion of his studio practice in Ghana is hardly the subject of this exhibition, its migratory undercurrents propel a new dawn of sculptural freedom and material fluency evident here in the wooden sculptures of *Shard Song*. It is this recognition of individual and collective vulnerability that El Anatsui's long exploration of themes of separation, solitude and reconnection resonates with the world today more than ever. Decontextualized from the world it has known, the identity of the shard —vulnerable, exposed and solitary— becomes above all a catalyst for life once again. The term 'song' in the exhibition's title is as much the recognition of liberatory spirit accomplished in these new sculptures as it is an homage to Anatsui's life-long, brave quest to liberate.



EXHIBITION
WORKS





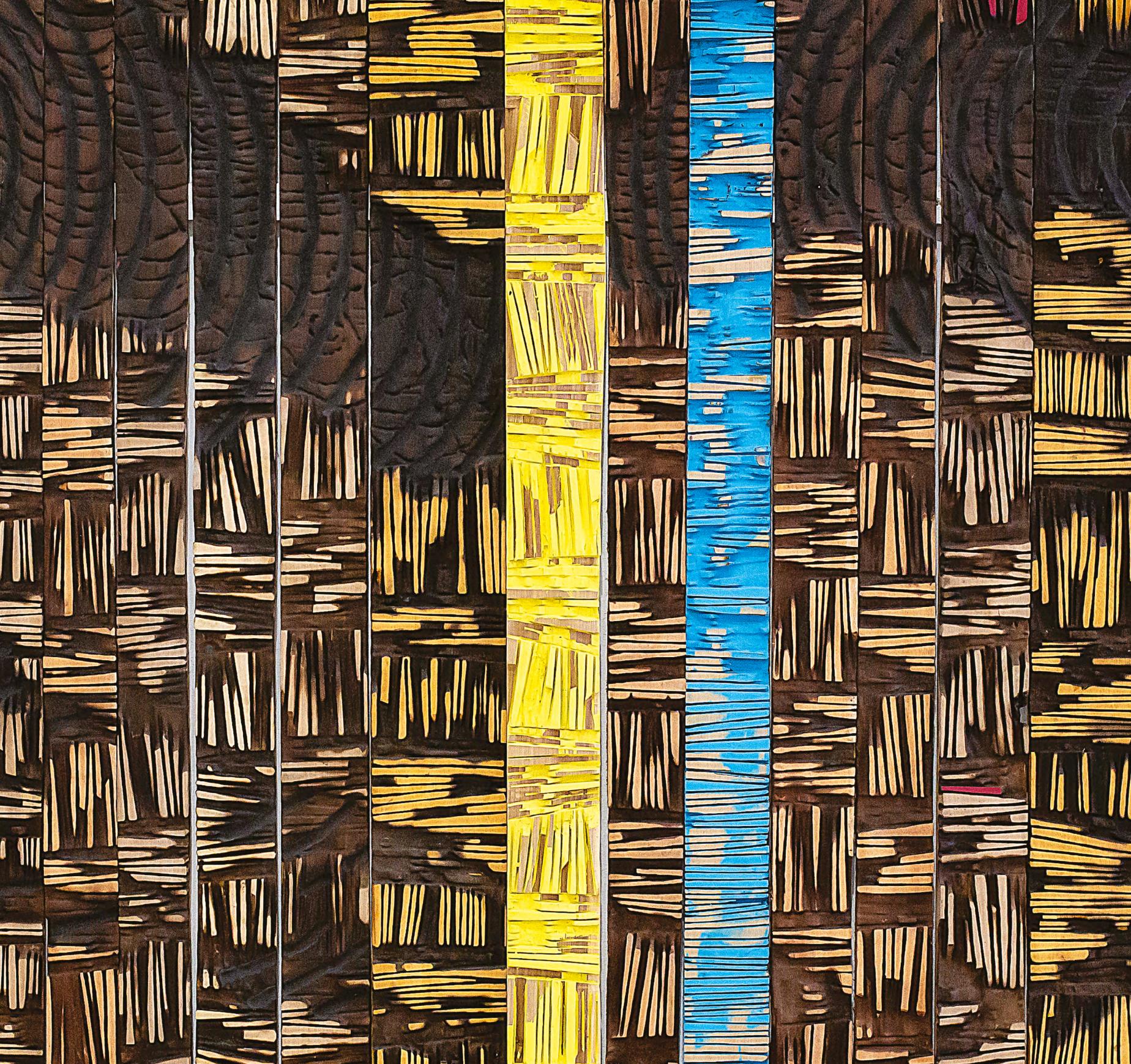
RAINBOW HUES, 2022

Tropical hardwood, 236 x 168 cm
Photo credit: Ofoe Amegavie



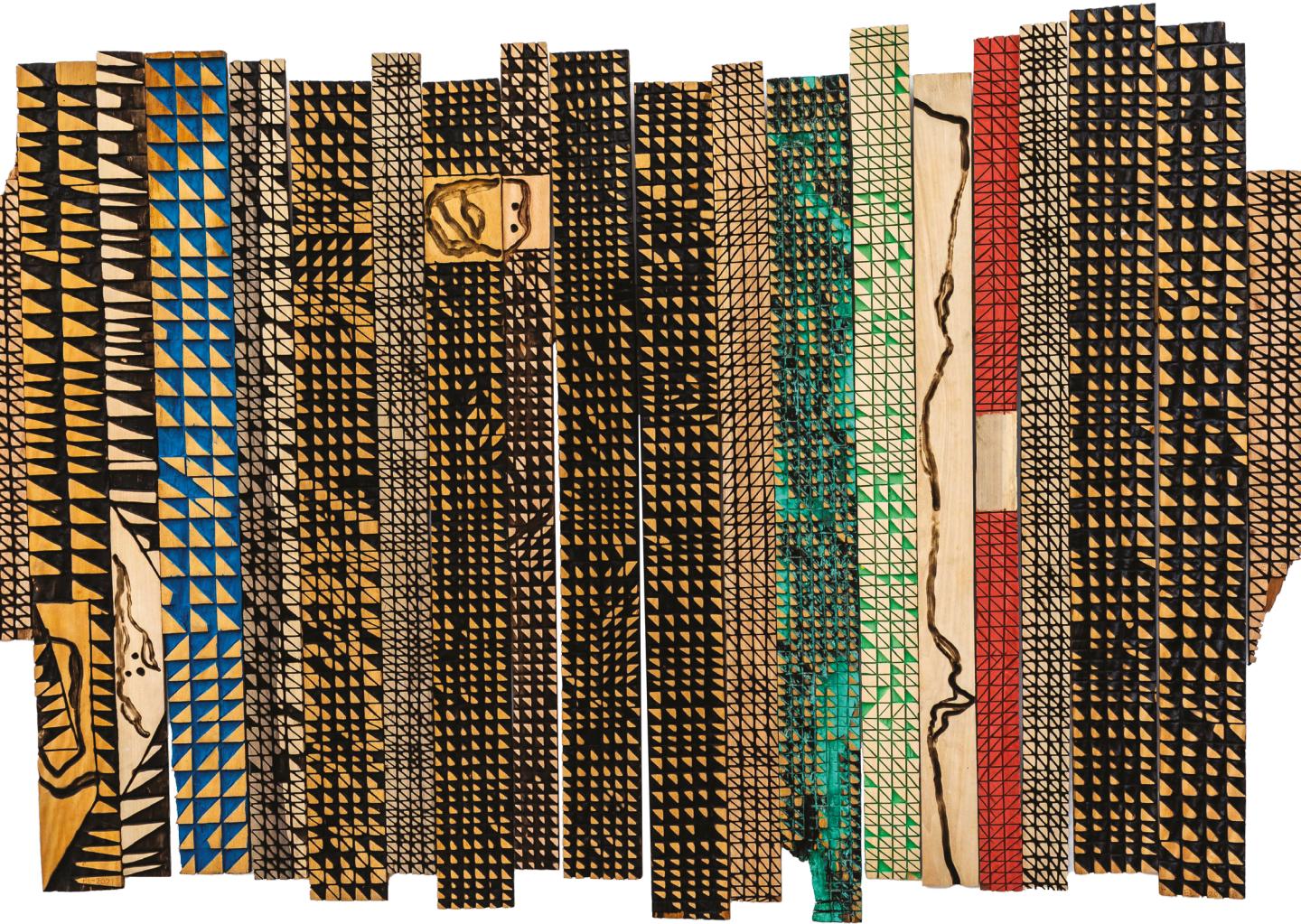
KEYBOARD OF LIFE, 2022

Tropical hardwood, 237 x 152 cm
Photo credit: Deryk Owusu Bempah



ANCIENT TEXT, 2022

Tropical hardwood, 260 x 165 cm
Photo credit: Deryk Owusu Bempah



DNA, 2021

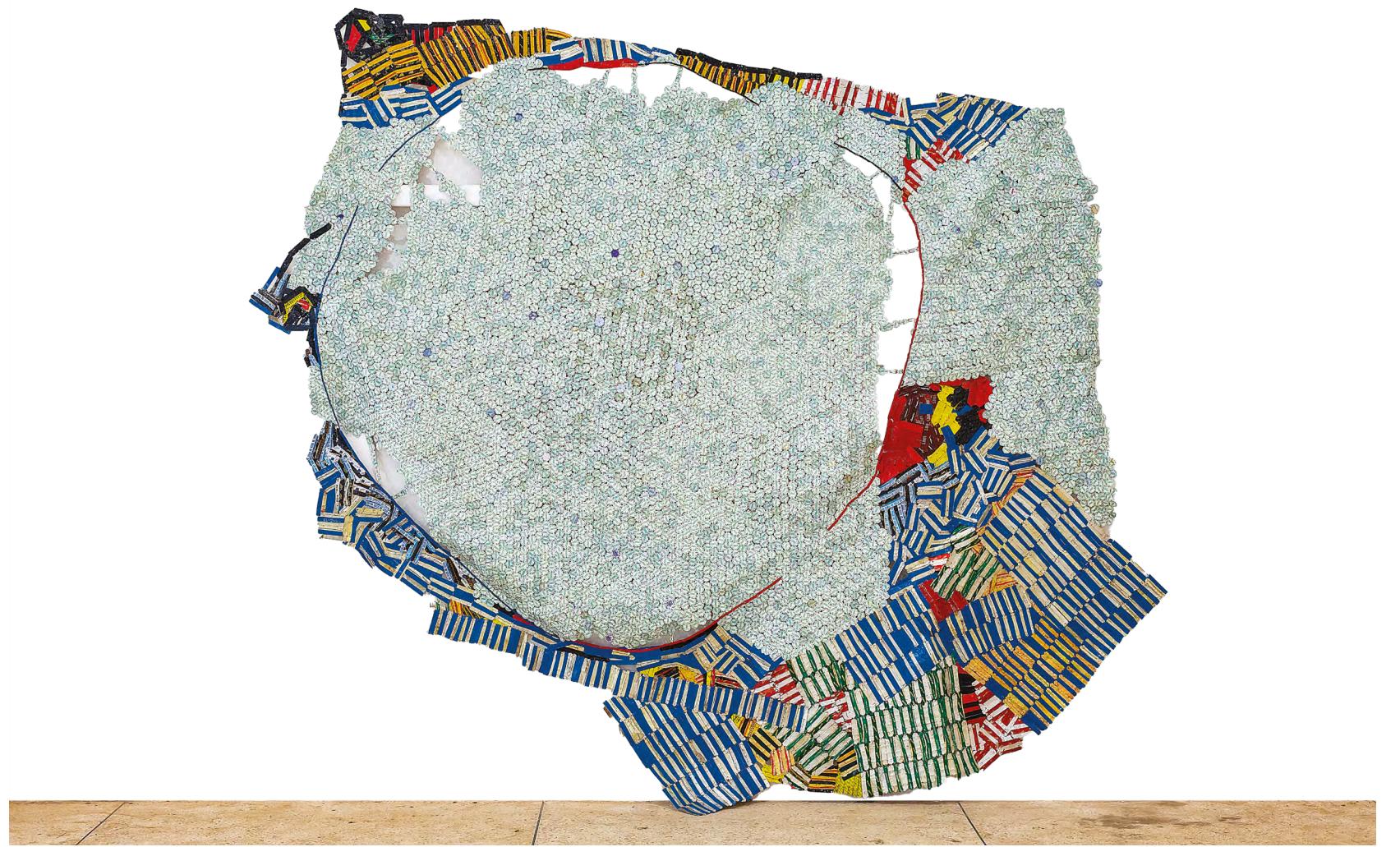
Tropical hardwood, 239 x 152 cm
Image courtesy of Efie Gallery
(shown in debut exhibition)





DETSI, 2008 - 2021

Aluminium and copper wire, 300 x 800 cm
Image courtesy of Efie Gallery



PROFILE OF A COUNTRY, 2022

Aluminium and copper, 304.8 x 274.32 cm
Photo credit: Deryk Owusu Bempah



PRODIGAL SON, 2022

Aluminium and copper, 304.8 x 335.28 cm
Photo credit: Deryk Owusu Bempah

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